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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a critical examination of how the intercultural communication field has evolved and how its future development might be planned. A variety of text and trade books, conference papers, research studies, and annotated bibliographies are examined in an attempt to discern general propositions on intercultural communication. It is concluded that there are at least five major propositions which underlie current thinking on intercultural communication. Each of the five propositions is examined in detail. (RB)

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CONCEPTUALIZING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by

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CS 501 309

CONCEPTUALIZING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Introduction

The excitement and adventure of contacting "exotic" or "barbaric" peoples of other lands has been reported throughout human history, whoever the sojourners and whatever their motives. This sense of the bizarre and romantic seems as much a part of 20th century as it was in the ages of exploration and conquest. For several years the author has used a projective exercise for opening discussion on the subject of intercultural contact: "In a moment I will say a two-word phrase. Please respond by generating a visual image. No synonyms or definitions, please. The phrase is 'intercultural communication.'" The verbal reports of the images are solicited by questions about who was participating, the setting, and the nature of the activity. In general, the responses have clustered reliably. The perceived location usually is a very large room, possibly a palace or ballroom; the participants are racially different; they are standing and often sipping tea; some are dressed in robes or other non-Western garb; they are talking in English or sometimes in French and are discussing international relations or world peace. In an alternate version, a Western agricultural agent or Peace Corpsman is standing in an open field beside a "native" of some kind, demonstrating a farming technique. These brave images probably reveal as much about the imaginers as about the nature of intercultural contact. Out of such speculation, much experience, and some scholarship has grown a burgeoning academic enterprise.

"Intercultural communication" is a phrase employed by a variety of academicians and casually used in the general-circulation press. As an interested observer and occasional contributor of this phenomenon, the author undertook an investigation of its current development-state. In a preliminary step, he searched for the coiner of the phrase or its first appearances in scholarly print. The results were inconclusive.[1] After about 1960, however, the tempo of use accelerates rapidly, with a number of variations and combinations, including "culture and communication," "cross-cultural communications," "cross-national communication," "international communication," "intercultural interchange," "interracial communication," "intercommunication," "interethnic communication," "interculturation," and "male-female communication." Clearly the most venerable is "international communication," which has been prevalent since the 1930's. Often these terms have been casually interchanged by one source; attempts have also been made to assign denotative meanings which refer to particular aspects of encounter which occur between culturally, politically, or ethnically different individuals or to the passage of messages across national boundaries. At least a minimal orthodoxy appears to be growing out of this effort.[2] Apparently it is well-intended, but not always functional.[3]

Acknowledgement that culture difference makes a difference in communication has now become so generally accepted by the academic community that few texts, anthologies or trade books in the areas of speech, communication, mass media, interrational relations, sociology, or public relations is complete without some attention to

the matter. Institutionalization of this idea has proceeded in the instructional and professional realms, with both undergraduate and graduate courses being offered by a growing number of institutions, extended in some cases to an advertised degree emphasis. Professional organizations have shared in this development.[4]

No one could seriously dispute the importance and salutary effects of affirming that cultural differences can have a profound effect on the degree of satisfaction and the outcomes of communication. What this paper proposes is that it is time to make a critical examination of how the field has evolved and how its future development might be planned. The hazard of the present situation lies in our being caught up by the romantic appeal of the concept and its bandwagon effect, so that we fail to examine the logical premises upon which the concept rests and proceed to develop our training, teaching, research, and theory on a base that is less productive and defensible than it could be.

The author has examined a variety of text and trade books, conference papers, research studies, and annotated bibliographies in an attempt to discern some general propositions on which the present development of the concept appears to be grounded, and tentatively concludes that there are at least five major propositions which underlie current thinking on the matter, and that each of them is deserving of scrutiny and possible restatement.

Propositions Extrapolated From The Literature

1. Intercultural Communication [in its various stylistic forms] is a unique dimension of communication which requires special labeling, attention, methodology and instruction.

2. Cultural differences between communicators function as boundaries or barriers which must be overcome if understanding and satisfaction are to be achieved.

3. Any given member of a cultural group is a potential interactor with any member of another cultural group.

4. Learning about a cultural pattern is an important means of reducing uncertainty about the behavior of a member of that culture.

5. Culture is primarily a phenomenon of region or nationality; national identity predicts culture.

Discussion of Propositions

Proposition 1

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IS A UNIQUE DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION WHICH REQUIRES SPECIAL LABELING, ATTENTION, METHODOLOGY, AND INSTRUCTION.

Adding "intercultural" to "communication" signals that there is a special class, or kind, of communication dominated by the phenomenon of cultural difference between participants. The phrase logically requires another class, "intracultural communication," where cultural differences are minimal or absent, and posits a system for dividing all human communication into one of the two classes. Yet treating this complex phenomenon as a dichotomous (rather than continuous) variable requires us to imagine a set of communication events which is culture-free and another which is bound to the cultures represented.

One can fantasize, if not observe, a situation free of cultural disparity, in which the only variability is generated by personality differences. Such an event might be a conversation between identical 10-year-old male twins who have been reared in the same house by the same parents and subjected to the same experience. Their talk may represent intracultural communication in its purest obtainable form. At the other extreme would be a fantasy in which a person who had never traveled outside his home county in the United States is parachuted into a central valley of New Guinea so remote that the inhabitants believe they are the only people in the world. Almost certainly, any attempts at symbolic interaction between the tribe and the newcomer would be characterized by virtually complete dissimilarity in views about what constitutes human existence.

But these two cases, if they occurred at all, would make up a minute portion of total human interaction. To return to the twins, if we specify that one is a male and one a female, we have introduced cultural variability, because boys and girls in most societies are subjected to differing cultural nurture, which by age ten will have generated somewhat different vocabularies, tool skills, role perceptions, food preferences, ideas of dress and adornment, attitudes toward sex, recreational patterns, and other classic dimensions of culture. To dismiss these differences as having minimal importance and being "sub-cultural" is not to accomplish much by way of definition, because then a reliable way of determining the threshholds among "intracultural," "subcultural" and "intercultural" must be produced. This would require sufficient precision to classify reliably the interactions of a cattle rancher from Montana

and another from Saskachewan, two French engineers of different ethnic backgrounds, or two Mexicans, one a farm laborer and one a jet-setter.

This should lead, in turn, to the realization that the term "culture," like "communication," is plagued with denotative ambiguity and diversity of meaning. "Culture" is often used to designate a large general area of human activity and of scholarly concern, rather than an operational concept. Cultural anthropologists, perhaps the most catholic of that group of scholars, have generated definitions such as: "A historically-derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group."[5] Such definitions are boundary-setting, but reveal little of the interior. Another alternative is to use definitions from more specialized anthropologists who have sought to explore a segment of the broad concept of culture. Such specialists include ethno-biologists, ethno-linguists, "national-character" anthropologists, archeologists, physical anthropologists, paleopathologists, and some geographers. The communication scholar, seldom a well-grounded anthropologist of any persuasion, is likely to find himself pragmatically deriving definitions and concepts from a number of general and special viewpoints in anthropological science, without a clear picture of their compatibility or usefulness in dealing with the phenomena he wishes to study. Of course, a parallel problem lies in the definition of "communication," as most scholars will testify.

Thus "intercultural communication" is probably an imprecise, non-operational label for all but the most contrived cases of human interaction. For all the rest, some cultural variability between participants will be present, but its amount is not a reliable predictor of the ease or difficulty of communication. Dealing with cultural variability probably does require special strategies, but determining what differences make a difference--and under what conditions of interaction--will require the gathering and assimilation of much more anecdotal and empirical data. The quest for the marker that separates intra- from inter-, as well as more subtle cues to the transitional stages marking subcultures, is probably a pointless search. The amount of cultural difference in a situation is theoretically free to vary from "none" to "complete." Rejecting the dichotomy and accepting the continuum deals with only some of the conceptual problems.

There are two alternate and pre-emptive ways of rephrasing the widely-asserted Proposition I, upon which the present development of the concept rests. Both directly refute the assertion of intercultural communication as a unique phenomenon. One is "ALL COMMUNICATION IS INTERCULTURAL."[6] The other is "NO COMMUNICATION IS INTERCULTURAL." These are alternate forms of the same statement: Both point to the same conclusion--that cultural variability is a universal element of the communication experience. Except as a public relations strategy, the term "intercultural communication" should be used sparingly by scholars, and then most properly as a post hoc description of encounters where cultural difference became

manifest, were recognized, and were successfully compensated for. As a a priori prediction of what will be the dominant aspect of an encounter, it must be advanced very tentatively, if at all.

Proposition II

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMUNICATORS FUNCTION AS BOUNDARIES OR BARRIERS WHICH MUST BE OVERCOME IF UNDERSTANDING AND SATISFACTION ARE TO BE ACHIEVED.

This is a recurrent theme in present literature--that difference and difficulty tend to parallel one another. Probably no one would deny that communication is easier when cultural difference is minimal. Whether the converse is true is a researchable question. Almost anyone with extra-cultural experience can testify that difficulty of communication does not arbitrarily vary directly with amount of cultural difference. Many such persons could describe highly satisfying encounters with individuals of quite different backgrounds, perhaps because the manifest differences gave them warning that almost nothing could be taken for granted. Conversely, there are ample illustrations of how a single culturally-rooted difference, as in beliefs about religion or sex, became so crucial that the communicative effort collapsed. As previously noted, the more manifest the difference, the more warning is available to a participant that compensation is called for. Hidden or minimal differences may create a false sense of ease or congruity.

A virtually unexamined dimension of this proposition concerns the effects of purpose on the interaction. If the situation is

casual or recreational, the prevailing mood may be tolerant and perhaps didactic, with interchange about dress, customs, or food in the respective cultures. Differences here are facilitative, except as fluency in the shared language may intervene. In a task-oriented interchange, difference in concepts of time, space, values, and specialized terminology may function initially as barriers proportionate to difference. If the task is urgent and affects mutual welfare, the level of accommodation and cooperation may be high, despite the reality of the cultural dissimilarity.

Still another little-examined dimension is the determination of territoriality, or of whose rules are being applied. The effect of cultural differences is often partially waived by this determination. When a person travels to another area to conduct business, the normal expectation is that he will accommodate to the cultural rules of the host. If his hosts expect that he will conform and he is unable or unwilling to do so, then the barriers may damage or destroy the interaction. If for reasons of politeness or status difference, the host strives to conform to the visitor's cultural pattern, the barrier effect may be reduced, though at some cost to the host.

Proposition II might appropriately be modified to "CULTURAL DIFFERENCES SIGNIFY THE NEED FOR ACCOMMODATION IN COMMUNICATION, BUT THEY ARE NOT ARBITRARILY EITHER BARRIERS OR FACILITATORS."

Proposition III

ANY GIVEN MEMBER OF A CULTURE IS A POTENTIAL INTERACTOR WITH ANY MEMBER OF ANOTHER CULTURE.

In the abstract, this is an appealing idea. Proponents poin to technologies like jet planes, cables, and communication satell as means of moving people, voices, images, and writing easily aro the "global village," with the promise of greater things to come. But any number of factors, singly and interactively, reduce to ne the vanishing point the likelihood of contact between two randoml selected individuals of different cultural backgrounds, whether they reside in the same or in different countries. Among these factors are the existence of purposes for interacting, financial access to the means of generating face-to-face or interposed comm nication, political and social freedom to interact, a shared spok language or a shared literacy, differences in ease of surface tra portation, uneven distribution of telephones world-wide, national postal services which are capable, by some estimates, of deliveri a letter to less than ten percent of the world's population, phy- sical and atmospheric effects on radio signals. If we realistica dismiss the finite, but incomprehensible, possibility of random contact between any two of the world's four billion + people, the tasks of developing research, theory, and instruction about "inte cultural" interaction becomes somewhat less impossible. A strate question arises at this point: whether to begin at the minimum- difference or the maximum-difference end of the cultural interact scale. Interest to date has been focused on the latter, more exo end, and this emphasis is likely to continue.[7] In some respects, it may be easier to deal with, because the actors and situations are more easily identifiable. When we find an individual with a

purpose for contacting persons of another cultural set, mutual agreement to proceed, the financial and physical means of making the contact, (by either face-to-face or interposed means), a shared spoken and/or written language, and mutual political and social freedom to interact, we have discovered the necessary and sufficient conditions for an "intercultural" encounter. Since these conditions will not exist randomly in any two populations, "intercultural" communicators will almost certainly be drawn from elite or sub-elite social classes in their respective societies.[8] The actors are probably brought together by shared backgrounds in business and industry, inter-governmental relations and diplomacy, art, scholarly pursuits, or specialization in such matters as health, education, agriculture, labor, military operations, transportation, meteorology, mass communications, or the like. Given these conditions, candidates for maximum-difference "intercultural" encounters make up a minute percentage of the members of any given society. Based on these assumptions, Proposition III would say "TRAINING, RESEARCH AND THEORY IN 'INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION' SHOULD REFLECT THE PROBABILITY THAT THE POPULATION OF PARTICIPANTS IS RELATIVELY SMALL AND IDENTIFIABLE."

Proposition IV

LEARNING ABOUT A CULTURAL PATTERN IS AN IMPORTANT MEANS OF REDUCING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE BEHAVIOR OF A MEMBER OF THAT CULTURE.

Hall's influential Silent Language makes an appealing case for the learning of generalizations or stereotypes about cultures in order to increase understanding of how and why people behave as

they do. His memorable examples of Persian appointments, Latin proximity, and Pueblo time-sense have come to stand for expectations that Persians will not predictably keep appointments, that Latins will insist on standing close while conversing, and that Pueblo Indians are not prompt. As post hoc explanations of how things turned out, these generalizations are socially reinforcing. As predictors of individual behavior (which Hall does not claim) they may range from highly accurate to badly misleading. If we did accept the premise that everyone is a potential interactor with everyone else, then such culture learning would be somewhat functional, because to the extent that the generalizations are accurate, they will probably predict with some accuracy the behavior of monocultural individuals. But if the necessary and sufficient conditions stated in the discussion of Proposition III are accepted and the population of potential interactors is perceived accordingly, the predictive power and accuracy of any within-culture generalization is greatly diminished. A candidate for intercultural contact as specified is not mono-cultural. As a result of education, involvement with foreigners, use of foreign mass media, and possibly of foreign travel, such a person is aware of the varieties of human experience, and probably has a culturally-mixed repertoire of responses at his disposal, to be tried out as he perceives them to be appropriate. This repertoire can give rise to unexpectedly reliable Persians, remote Latins, and prompt Pueblos.

John Useem and associates were among the first proponents of the "third culture" model, which they used to describe the cultural

milieu of scholars and technicians from India who had been exposed to Western technological culture and had then returned home to function as agents of change.[9] Such persons were perceived as representing a transitional orientation between Indians and Westerners. The third-culture idea appears to have great potential for the development of research and theory in intercultural contact, but it has received minimal attention from researchers and theorists of the subject. The coming together of two persons with a somewhat cosmopolite view represents three sets of cultural resources. Let "A" stand for those of a person from one culture, "B" for those of a representative from the other, and "X" for the indeterminate cosmopolite dimension. This latter element denotes each person's past contact with other-culture individuals and/or a cognitive store of information and attitudes about such contacts.[10] Of course, it is logically possible that A and B would have studied the cultural stereotypes of the other and would negotiate a straightforward tradeoff involving, say, coffee for tea in exchange for sitting further apart, but this is unlikely. The more probable resolution is for A and B to move laterally--on a tentative, trial-and-error basis--into X, the synthetic third-culture orientation, which will unconsciously include elements of A and B, but may also involve invented or previously-learned behaviors not a part of either culture. The most manifest of these accomodations is likely to be language, in cases where a shared first language is not available. One unplanned residue of past British world influence, augmented by more recent U.S. involvement in world affairs, has been to make English, (which is second only to Chinese as a first language

world-wide) the primary medium of international contact, so that the chosen language for the "X" interaction is much more likely than not to be English. This is true whether the participants are from Canada and South Africa or from Afghanistan and Japan. The distribution of the English "world" language within sub-elites of most nations means that an unparalleled amount of direct converse has become possible in the past few decades. The use of this "international" language reinforces the third-culture ambience. Another pressure toward lateral synthesis of culture pertains to the purposes of intercultural contact. Very many of these purposes relate to technological or "developmental" matters generated by the more industrialized societies of the Northern hemisphere. This is often true whether one of the participants is a Northerner from Europe, North America, Northeast Asia, Israel, or the Soviet Union, or whether both are from one of the less-technologically-oriented countries of the Southern hemisphere. Technology embodies a synthetic supra-culture which transcends or displaces many traditional elements of social relationships, diet, politics, religion, art, dress, craftsmanship, etc., and consequently generates its own communication genre. Much of the interaction of culturally-different persons involving matters affected by technology is expectably carried out in the requisite third-culture orientation. Given prior assumptions about potential candidates for intercultural contact, Proposition IV can be rephrased to "CULTURE LEARNING IS A USEFUL BACKGROUND FOR 'INTERCULTURAL' CONTACT: IT MAY NOT PREDICT BEHAVIOR FOR A GIVEN SITUATION, WHICH IS LIKELY TO OCCUR IN A SYNTHETIC 'THIRD CULTURE' AMBIENCE."

Proposition V

CULTURE IS PRIMARILY A PHENOMENON OF REGION OR NATIONALITY.

This view is especially appealing to many Northern-hemisphere social scientists, because of their experience with relatively homogeneous social-political-economic nation systems. Concomitant assumptions are that persons within a national boundary are more culturally alike than different and that collectively they have more in common with one another than with persons of other nationalities. Such a common-sense view is reinforced by any map showing the "vertical" political boundaries which delineate nations. For the student of intercultural contact, perhaps already burdened with the belief that in culture he is examining a definable and discrete phenomenon, the "nation-equals-culture" idea is a potential source of additional error.

In his statement entitled "Is Latin America a Myth?" John T. McNelly points out defects in the convenient generalization called Latin America, as well as the assumed homogeneity of many of the region's countries. As evidence he cites the presence of language groups, racial stocks, crop groups, climate groups, rural-urban contrasts, religious adaptations and various different heritages of Hispanic colonialism scattered across the land mass.[11] Thus realistic cultural maps of Latin America might largely ignore political boundaries and define more precise cultural homogeneity among non-contiguous portions of the continent, such as intact Indian populations of Guatemala, Bolivia and Brazil, heavy industry workers

of Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay, potato farmers of the Andean slopes, and the aristocracies of Peru, Mexico and El Salvador.

This challenge to the assumption of cultural identity based on national identity strongly suggests that the investigator of intercultural contact should cautiously examine the easy parallels between "nation" and "culture." He may find much greater viability in a "horizontal" analysis based on common occupation, socio-economic class, or ethnicity--independent of citizenship--in his quest for cultural variables that make a difference in communication.

Generalization V might profitably be rephrased to "NATIONALITY IS ONE MAJOR DIMENSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: IT IS NOT BY ITSELF A RELIABLE INDICATOR OF THE CULTURAL BEHAVIORS OF ITS CITIZENS."

Summary

An informal summary of these arguments generates the view that cultural difference is a universal property of communicative interaction and this difference should be regarded as a continuous variable, not as the basis for a unique class of communication. Differences signal the need for accommodation, but do not necessarily specify the *a priori* degree of difficulty they present. When differences are apparently large, the population of potential interactors is probably small and identifiable. When the difference is small, the population of potential interactors will be large. The need for study of minimum-difference interaction may be less appealing, but it is no less important. Culture learning is a helpful background, so long as it is utilized to understand individual behavior, rather than to predict it. Sub-elites from manifestly

different cultures will probably utilize a synthetic third culture as they interact. Because cultural plurality is a characteristic of many nation-states, the prediction of cultural identity from national citizenship should be approached with caution.

Implications

If communication scholars were to accept this statement as a point of view, or to reach similar conclusions from a different set of inductions, what would be some of the likely effects on teaching, research and professional association in communication? We might expect the honorable retirement of the term "intercultural communication" in its various forms and permutations from course titles, publications, research designs, and organizations, at least in any specific or technical sense. The disappearance of the term should not and probably would not signal any decline of interest in the study of cultural difference as a dimension of communication. If our preoccupation with intercultural contact as a unique phenomenon could be abated, we could generate an enriched approach to the study of all human communication. The insights and values of the past two exploratory decades in this area are so important that henceforth no instruction in spoken or written communication could be regarded as sound without full attention to cultural identity as a characteristic of sources and receivers.

Research designs in communication would be complete only if they included the means of examining demographic and socio-cultural characteristics as potential sources of variance and also of

investigating the interaction of these differences with communicative purposes.[12] The ultimate goal of such research would be the generation of middle-range theories with the power to predict process and outcomes where cultural variability is found. This would represent the ultimate convergence of intercultural and intracultural communication study.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Among the first users of the terms in professional literature were Edward T. Hall and William F. Whyte in "Intercultural Communication: A Guide to Men of Action," Human Organization, 19 (1960). Few would disagree that Hall's The Silent Language (New York: Doubleday, 1959) played a central role in calling the attention of communication scholars to the interrelationship of culture and communication. In his pioneer book, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, 1960). David K. Berlo cites the "social-cultural context" of source and receiver in the SMCR model but makes no reference to interactions which should be labeled as intercultural. In the "Author and Key-Word Index" of the Journal of Communication, 1951-68, the terms appears only once, in a 1968 citation about using motion pictures.

[2]Compare the generally-similar terms and definitions in L.S. Harms, Intercultural Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Michael H. Prosser, Intercommunication Among Nations & People (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Andrea L. Rich, Interracial Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

[3]A recent ERIC annotated bibliography of 67 books and articles announces that an "international-intercultural" dichotomy will be used to distinguish between official and unofficial contact. The complier acknowledges that this distinction is "somewhat arbitrary" and it is not actually employed in the report. See Fred Casmir, International, Inter-Cultural Communication (New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, August, 1973).

[4]Three organizations reflect their concern with international and intercultural matters through their structure. The International Communication Association has "Intercultural Communication" as the fifth of its seven major divisions. The Associations for Education in Journalism has an "International Communications Division." The Speech Communication Association has established a "Commission on International and Intercultural Communication."

[5]Kluckhohn, Clyde and Kelly, William, "The Concept of Culture," in Linton, Ralph (Ed.) The Science of Man in the World Crisis (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 98.

[6]On this subject, Alfred G. Smith asserts, "My first idea is that all communication is inter-cultural. Not just some communication. At the very least, all communication is between sub-cultures." In Carl E. Larson, and Frank E. X. Dance (Eds.) Perspectives on Communication (Shorewood, Wisconsin: Helix Press, 1970), p. 166.

[7]Concentration on maximum-difference interaction will be detrimental to the viewpoint being developed here if we do not concurrently move ahead on research and theory about the more subtle

aspects of difference and the difference they make. If we define sex as a genesis of male and female acculturation within a society, what will be the differences and similarity in vocabulary, non-verbal styles, attitudes and value structures attributable to sex-group membership? What is the range of these differences? What apparent effects will they have under what conditions? The same questions are appropriate for age, racial, ethnic, occupational, and social class interactions within a society. Because the markers are less dramatic and the potential actors less easy to specify, the investigation will be more difficult, but not less important.

[8]There are special cases in which not all of the participants can be comfortably described as sub-elites. These include tourism, foreign military service, and "Peace Corps" activity, where the sojourners possess some degree of elitism, while their potential contacts may or may not.

[9]Useem, John, and others, "Men in the Middle of the Third Culture," Human Organization, 22: 169-179.

[10]For example, see "Change Agents as Receivers of Mass Communication," Deutschmann, P.J., Ellingsworth, H.W., and McNelly, J.T., Communication and Social Change in Latin America, Ch. V (New York: Praeger, 1968) for a report of what a group of sub-elites say they learned about life in other countries from foreign mass media.

[11] Deutschmann, et al., op. cit., pp. 15ff.

[12]Edward T. Hall's "Map of Culture" is a comprehensive model of the cultural matrix. Op. cit., pp. 174-75.